

Tuition hike prompts parents to pull kids from Living Word

School closes due to projected low enrollment

By Will Brumleve

ROBERTS — Debra and Jerry Marshall forked over \$4,500 in tuition this year for their two children to attend Living Word Christian School and Academy in Roberts.

And when the Living Word School Board of Directors proposed to raise tuition by 20 percent for the 2004-05 school term, they were prepared to spend the extra money to provide their children with a quality, Christian education.

But it seems others weren't quite as willing, or able.

About 47 percent of parents decided not to re-enroll their children at Living Word for next year, prompting school officials earlier this week to announce they will close the school's doors once the spring semester ends on Friday.

"Everybody was notified Monday," said Debra Marshall, mother of Living Word fifth-grader Ryan Marshall and junior Whitney Marshall. "The emotions were so high in the school. There wasn't a dry eye in the place."

Last year, the Marshalls spent \$2,400 in tuition for their daughter to attend Living Word and \$2,100 for their son to go to school there.

The proposed tuition hike would have required parents to pay up to \$2,775 in tuition for students in kindergarten through eighth grade and \$2,975 for high school students next year. Each student would have also been required to raise at least \$500 through fund-raising toward the school, as they have in the past. Living Word Church, which houses the school, would have paid another

The overall revenue generated per student would have totaled \$4,075.

Salary raise contributed to hike

Living Word raised tuition to help cover a proposed 3 percent salary increase for the school's teachers, who had not received a raise in two years. But in down economic times, the cost was too much to pass on to parents and the church.

"As far as I know, people are just having a hard time coming up with cash," said Jerry Marshall, a Living Word board member. "The economy had a lot to do with it, because some people had to change jobs, or some lost jobs, and things like that. Since 9-11, everyone's been sort of scared still."

Jerry Marshall said that since pri-

vate schools, such as Living Word, receive no state or federal funding, and depend on community donations and private funding to survive, when enrollment went down, so did the school.

"Even without the salary increases for staff, the revenue wasn't high enough to keep the school open," Jerry Marshall said.

"The church couldn't hold up the school, because the church was supporting the school," said Debra Marshall.

The board of directors had voted to raise tuition about two months ago, according to Living Word Church and School board member Rick Kirby. Following the vote, parents received re-enrollment invitations showing the tuition hikes.

"We really hadn't been considering it, it's just that we were hoping the enrollment would stay high enough to keep things going," said Jerry Marshall. "(Until then) it was really steady and going up a bit."

Marshall said he was shocked when the board reviewed enrollment data for next year and discovered that about 50 of the school's 120-plus students would not be returning.

"I was really surprised that people didn't want to re-enroll," he said. "We have excellent teachers out there."

Kirby said that even with the increase, tuition at Living Word would have remained significantly less than the average tuition paid at private schools in Illinois. On Wednesday, Kirby visited Judah Christian School in Champaign, which charges students a flat fee of \$3,600 for tuition.

Unlike Judah, Living Word had given parents in its re-enrollment notice the option to defray tuition costs through additional fund-raising throughout the school year.

Living Word officials had also tried alternative means of raising revenue for the school before the tuition hike was proposed; but none generated the necessary funds.

"We've done a number of things to try to impact the tuition and have it be appropriate," said Kirby, noting that Living Word has generated revenue from scholarship donations, student sponsorship programs and fund-raisers.

In the fall, the Marshalls plan to

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send their son to PBL Junior High School and daughter to either PBL High School or Christ Lutheran High School in Buckley.

"My children loved going (to Living Word)," said Deb Marshall. "My children were learning God's values and God's ways in the world, and not in man's ways. I wanted to keep them in a safer environment."

Living Word Christian School was established within Living Word Church in 1998, serving students in kindergarten through sixth grade. A junior high school was added within the church later, followed by the introduction of a high school within the facility in 2002.